

The Seeley Mastodon: A Paleo-Indian Kill?

By

James L. Murphy
The Ohio State University Libraries
Columbus, Ohio

Forsyth (1963) tabulates five fossil elephant finds from Ashtabula Co., Ohio. Two of these are isolated *Mammot* teeth from near Amboy, and there is little additional information about two of the other three finds—mastodon remains discovered near Kingsville in 1952 and a mastodon found west of Austinburg around 1945.

The Seeley mastodon, discovered April 16, 1878 (not 1876, as stated in Forsyth), is of particular interest because of the possibility of its being a Paleo-Indian kill site, a fact apparently forgotten since the discovery 105 years ago. Unfortunately, as is the case with other mastodon sites in Ohio, the evidence for Paleo-Indian association remains inconclusive.

Only two contemporary accounts of the Seeley mastodon find are known, both occurring in Jefferson, Ohio, newspapers, and I have found no subsequent references to it other than Forsyth's listing. The occurrence is not included in Hay (1923), nor do I find any reference to it in the Ashtabula County histories. Bush (1979) conducted an archaeological survey of the Austinburg area, including a portion of the Seeley farm, but makes no mention of the Austinburg mastodon. The whereabouts of the actual remains of the mastodon are also unknown.

The April 25, 1878, issue of the Jefferson *Ashtabula Sentinel* carries a brief account of "A Pre-historic Find" on the farm of Boudinot Seeley, south-east of Austinburg. The site has been more precisely located by checking Ashtabula Co. deed records; these show that Seeley purchased part of lot 36, Austinburg Twp., in 1875 (Fig. 1). (Though born near Painesville, Lake Co., Seeley moved to the Hanging Rock iron district of Lawrence Co., Ohio, at the age of 19 and engaged in the iron industry for 30 years, returning to north-eastern Ohio only in 1873. For an interesting account of him and his father, see Anonymous 1893:376-78). According to the *Sentinel*, the mastodon was discovered by a Mr. Owen, who "was digging a drain for tile when he struck what he supposed was a root, but finding after cutting of the pieces that it was bone, he further investigated the matter and found the supposed roots were ribs." The *Sentinel* reporter examined the excavated remains and describes them as follows:

"The largest bones found are those of the skull, which is about three

feet in length and almost three feet between the eyes. There were a number of ribs, some almost perfect, the longest of which was 4 feet 5 inches in length. One section of the vertebra measured 18 inches from the top down. On Friday a part of the shoulder blade was unearthed. An estimate made in a rough way gave the depth of body at nearly nine feet and length from 12 to 14 feet. But as all of the bones are more or less broken, and no one accustomed to estimate such animals were at hand, this may be a wild estimation."

The locality, which the reporter also visited, is described as "one which would naturally suggest itself as the most possible place for the preservation of the bones. The small field of perhaps fifty acres borders on a small run [Center Creek]. About forty rods from the brink is a swale or sink, a slight depression in the earth of perhaps an acre in extent, without outlet. Here in ages gone by, no doubt was a marshy place or jungle to which animals would go for water or shade." According to the *Sentinel*, the bones were found "covering a space fully 25 feet apart." The bones occurred in "a tenacious blue clay almost free from stones, some four feet below the surface. Over the clay is decayed vegetable matter forming a rich mould of nearly two feet in depth."

The May 5th issue of the *Sentinel* carries another note about further searching: "The search will be made more carefully and thorough in order to discover traces of human remains about the skeleton." According to the writer, "J.C.T.,"

"Specimens of charcoal have been found in the blue clay about the head of the Mastodon. And ten arrow heads were also found nearby three feet under the surface, but it will probably ever remain unknown whether or not this 'Ohioticus' was killed and feasted upon by pre-historic man."

There is an additional account of the Seeley find, in the form of a letter to the editor of the *Sentinel*'s rival newspaper, the *Jefferson Gazette*, written by none other than Rev. Stephen D. Peet, Ashtabula clergyman/archaeologist, and parts of his letter are much more amusing than informative. A nearly identical account is given in *The American Antiquarian* (Peet 1878b). He does,

however, provide some specific data not otherwise available:

"The Mastodon . . . is only one of the many which have been found on this continent, and had nothing remarkable about it except that it was quite near the surface, within three or four feet. The bones were embedded in clay in the midst of a small cat-swamp, and so far as they have been taken out are in a good state of preservation. There are 25 ribs, which vary from 3 to 4 feet long, and from 4 to 8 inches in width. The vertebrae, 6 or 8 of which have been taken out, are about 13 inches in diameter. The scapula, or shoulder blade, about 3 feet 3 inches one way, 3 feet 4 inches across, and 2 feet 8 inches back to the socket; the socket being 8 by 5 inches in diameter. The head, which was found bottom up, was also about 3 feet long and 2 feet 8 inches in diameter. The head, which was found bottom up, was also about 3 feet long and 2 feet 8 inches wide. There were no tusks found, and only a fragment of a tooth. The skeleton seemed to have been disturbed after the animal died, for some of the ribs were in direction north from the head, and the shoulder blade about 20 feet south of it, and other ribs were scattered about in various directions."

According to Peet, "There were traces of fire in the muck, and the man who found the bones says that he discovered coal in the clay near the head, and that there seemed to be a heap of ashes over the head as he struck down to it." Peet himself claimed to have discovered "some small fragments of coal in layers just above the clay and beneath the muck. Unfortunately, the nature of this 'coal' remains unclear; although Peet apparently attributed it to fire, it could be simply carbonized plant remains associated with the peat or 'muck' or it might even have been fragments of black Devonian shale carried southward by the Wisconsin glaciers. Peet's ability to distinguish these three phenomena is rendered doubtful by his next statement:

"An arrow-head was found just at the edge of the swamp the night before the bones were discovered . . . It is carbonized by age and is as black as any European paleolithic weapon, but has all the finish and

chippings of a neolithic or modern arrow-head. It was found in the clay about 2½ feet below the surface, and about fifty feet from the animal."

One can only speculate whether Peet's "carbonized" arrow-head was a fluted point of Upper Mercer flint or not. In any case, his statement that the point was found fifty feet away from the mastodon indicates that we probably do not have a direct association of artifact and mastodon remains, although one must also wonder about the proximity of the other nine reported projectile points. Peet's own opinion is stated in his usual fashion. After noting that "no traces of man's occupancy have anywhere been discovered so closely associated with the bones of a mastodon, for many years," he goes on to say that "like the sea serpent, the question is, whether any stray [mastodon] specimens survived after man's advent. My own opinion is, that the terrace-epoch was more modern than many think, and that many changes in the alluvial formation have taken place since man inhabited the continent; so that we can predicate nothing concerning the extreme antiquity of either man or the mastodon from any thing which we find."

Evidence for associating man with the Seeley mastodon, then, is reduced to three arguments: the scattering of the mastodon bones, indicating post-mortem disturbance; the presence of ash or charcoal, indicating fire; the association of one to ten flint points. Actually, a scatter of 25 feet is not uncommon in mastodon finds; nor does the incompleteness of the skeleton testify in itself to butchering. The presence of fire is dependent upon the testimony of Owens and Peet and is rendered suspect by Peet's confusing identification of "coal" as well as his belief that flint can be "carbonized" by age. It is noteworthy that no mention is made of any of the bones actually being charred or burned. Finally, while one or more arrowpoints occurred in the clay, at approximately the same depth, there is no evidence that any of these was nearer to the skeleton than fifty feet. The case for the Seeley mastodon being a prehistoric kill site remains an intriguing possibility but one that cannot be proven beyond a reasonable doubt.

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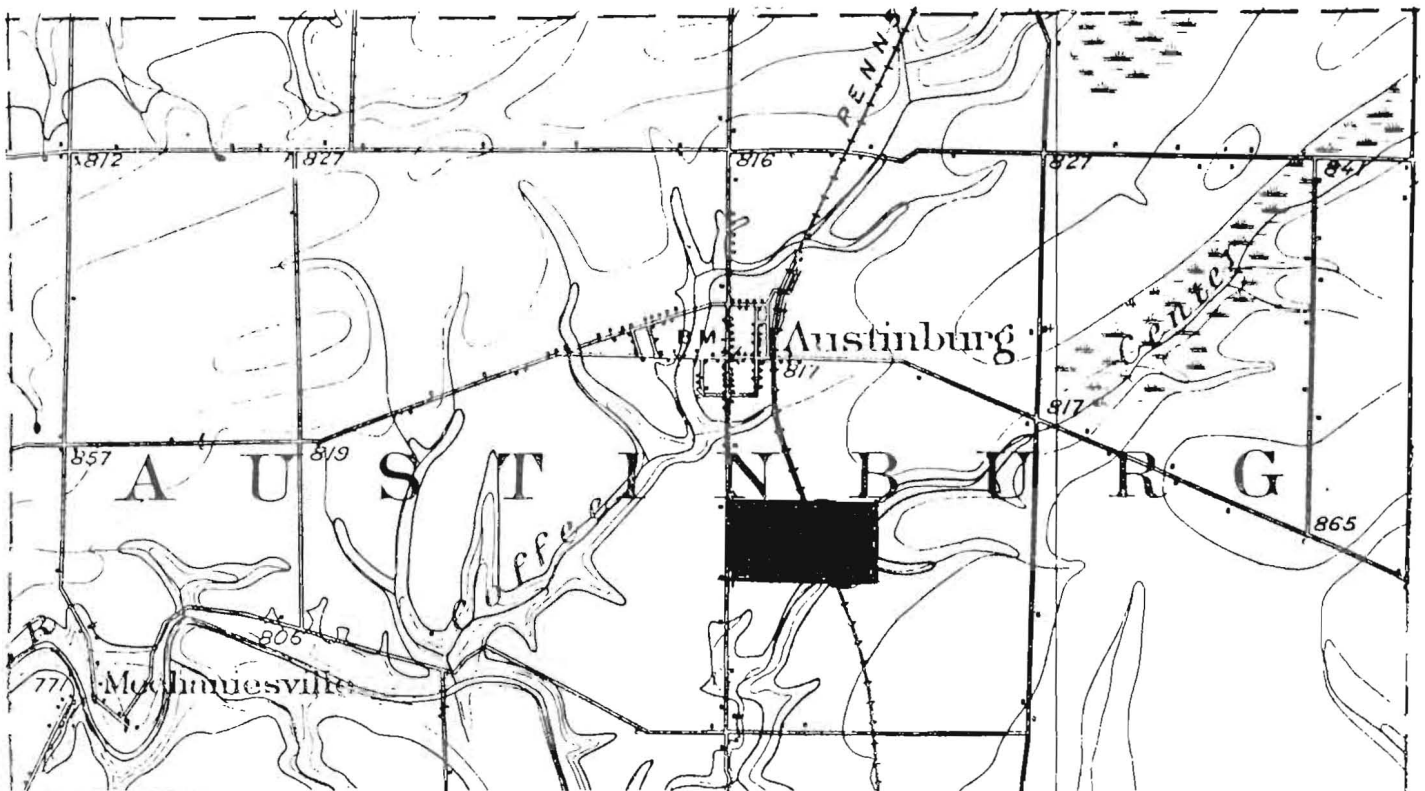


Fig. 1 (Murphy) Northern half of Austinburg Township, Ashtabula Co., Ohio. Seeley Farm indicated in black. Portion of U.S.G.S 15' Ashtabula quadrangle.